

Porter Beach Fishermen Served Perch Dinners To Thousands of Hungry Chicagoans

by Kay Franklin and Norma Schaeffer

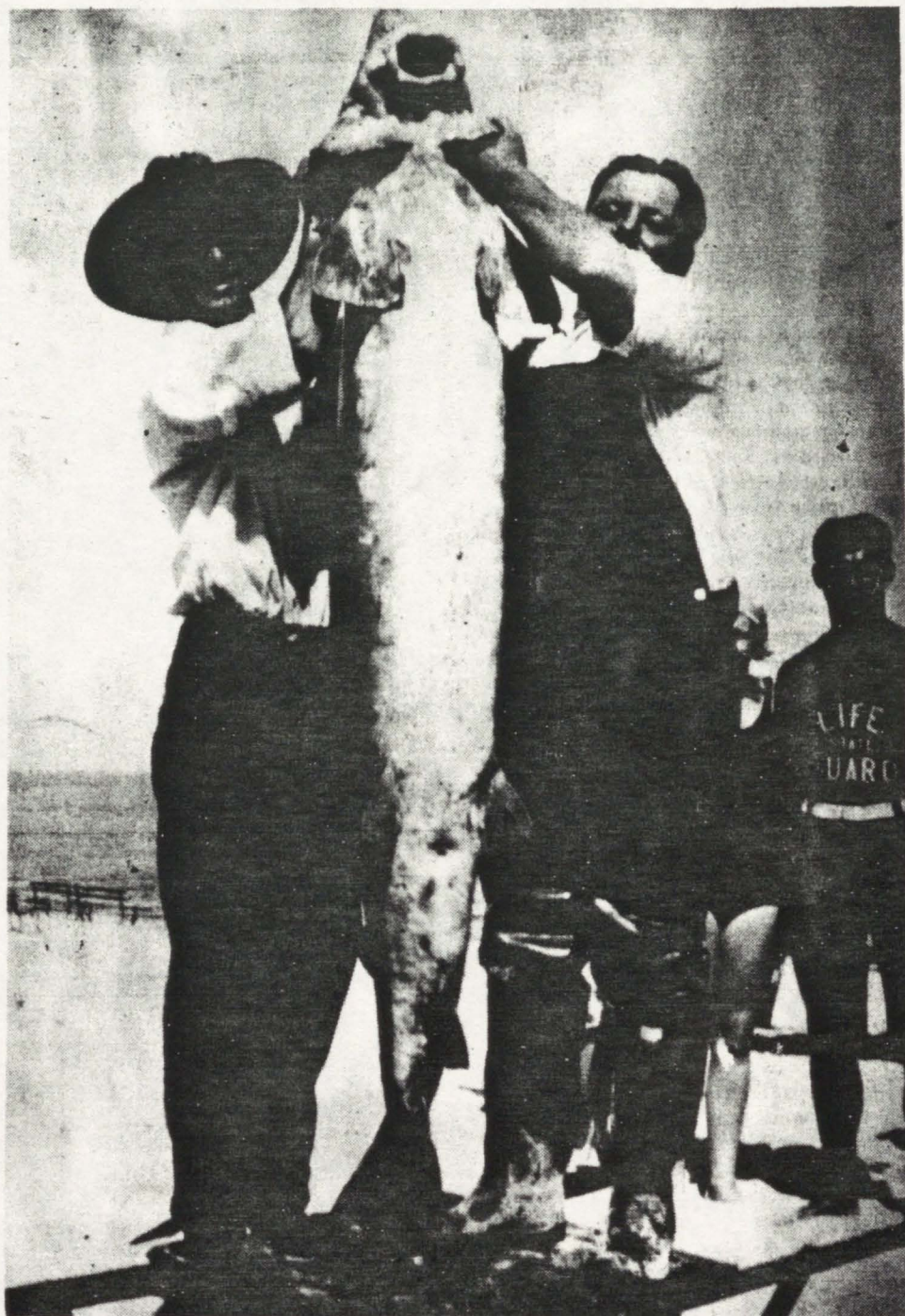
For almost 50 years, the Johnson family and the Sabinske family made Porter Beach a center for commercial fishing along the southern Lake Michigan shoreline. Though they stopped operating three decades ago, the nostalgic remembrances of their families, friends and customers bring back an era when perch was king and thousands of Chicagoans flocked to partake of their fish dinners.

Both Dick Sabinske and John Peter Johnson settled on the uninhabited Porter County foredunes in the 1900's. Until their coming, not a single human being lived on the beach in the 20-mile stretch between Miller and Michigan City. Johnson arrived first in 1906. Initially, he tried his luck at farming. Unable to make a go of it, he moved his family to Whiting and then came back to Porter County to try the fishing business. Sabinske reached the Dunes wilderness in 1909. An experienced fisherman, he left his father and two brothers to continue their declining fishing operation in Miller in order to strike out on his own.

Johnson located at what is now the corner of Wabash Street and Johnson Beach Road in Porter Beach. There he built a fish house and summer living quarters while maintaining a home in Chesterton for his wife and two boys, Elmer and Bill. They would later join him in the fishing enterprise.

Two blocks to the east at what is now Dearborn Street, Sabinske bought an old, two-room shack, now incorporated into the present home of Martha Mosier Reynolds. In front he constructed a fish house and boat winch which he continued to use until 1952.

Within a few years after his arrival at Porter Beach, Johnson moved eastward along the beach to the general vicinity of the Indiana Dunes State Park bath house and parking lot. He found fishing better at the new locale and had tired of trying to manoeuvre his horse and wagon up and down the steep dunes of his former location. With his son, Will, old enough to help out in the business, he saw an opportunity to capture a growing clientele of Prairie Club members, who were putting up cabins and tents in the general vicinity. The Johnsons built a complex which included a fish house, restaurant, pavilion, grocery store, bath house and family quarters. Here they sold part of their catch at retail, sent a portion into the Chicago market and became famous for their fish dinners. Mouths water and eyes go glazed at the memory of those meals. Their simple, some would say primitive, eatery attracted a vast clientele. The menu consisted of fresh fried perch, salad, potato, a vegetable and bread and butter — all for \$1. Chicagoans by the droves came to the Dunes for a day's outing at the Johnsons, which brother, Elmer, joined after World War I. Some took the South



A sturgeon caught in the early 1930s by Johnson brothers, pictured here, Elmer at the right.
Note the round mouth of the sturgeon, which is a scavenger fish.

Shore train to the Tremont stop and then boarded one of the waiting taxi cabs driven by either Al Didelot or C.C. Kings for the ride to the shore. When the Dunes Highway (Rt. 12) opened in 1923, others drove to the Dunes to eat at Johnsons.

In 1929, because of the establishment of the State Park, Indiana forced Johnsons to give up their operation. The brothers then moved back to the family's original

location in what was then called Johnson Beach. Bound and determined not to again endure dirt roads, they built Wabash Street and installed electricity. They also expected to transport the restaurant to the Porter Beach site, but the building fell into Dune Creek during the move. Instead the Johnson brothers built a new restaurant which is still standing. For the next 23 years, they continued to fish commercially and serve their famous dinners. The

Johnson brothers retired in 1952 after 48 years in business. Elmer passed away in the early 1960's and Bill in 1977.



Dick Sabinski, right, and friend drying their nets, circa 1955.

Dick Sabinske, at first, concentrated solely on fishing while wife, Martha, and his two baby girls, Lilian and Phyllis, remained in Miller. Like the Johnsons, he used a horse and wagon to haul his catch, loaded in fish boxes, to the New York Central station in Chesterton or Porter. He also sold some of his catch to Gary and Michigan City fish stores. As the girls grew older, the Sabinske's moved to Chesterton and spent their summers with their father at Porter Beach. "It was like having a giant sandbox all to yourself," daughter Phyllis recalls. When the Dunes became more populated, Sabinske also sold a portion of his daily harvest from the sea to retail customers. In addition, he sold ice and provided a cartage service for the increasing number of Porter Beach summer residents. He also served fish dinners though on a much more modest scale than the Johnsons. "Mother and Dad used two kerosene stoves to fry the perch," Phyllis remembers. "On weekends, clubs would come to the house for a meal. My sister and I would serve as waitresses."

When Johnson and Sabinske began their fishing at Porter Beach, they built their own boats and made their own nets of linen line. Cliff Lewin, who now has a Porter Beach home and worked for Sabinske as a youngster, describes the open wooden boats: "They were typical dorries with high bows and beams, made of wooden planks and measuring 18 feet long and six feet wide." In later years, the fishermen equipped their boats with inboard motors. Even later, they acquired tugs. Sabinske had one with his two brothers appropriately named "Three Brothers."

These pioneer fishermen thrived on an extraordinarily hard life. Without any of the fancy gadgetry which modern-day anglers enjoy, their equipment was crude, rude and homemade. However, they brought in outstanding catches of huge sturgeon, immense trout and hundreds of pounds of fish roe.

Old age and pollution eventually drove them from the fishing business. Their lines turned black and their aluminum corks disintegrated. With the fish population diminishing and the cost of business increasing, the Porter Beach fishing industry shut up shop in 1952. Sabinske alone stayed on at his home until 1962.

Norma Schaeffer and Kay Franklin have written a political history of the conflict for control of Indiana's Lake Michigan shoreline between 1816 and 1982. The University of Illinois Press will publish the book in October, 1983.



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The early fish house, foreground, of the Johnson brothers at Waverly Beach in the 1930s. Much of the house was used to store great chunks of ice cut from the lake and kept in sawdust all summer long.

A Few Old-Fashioned Stores Still Offer Their Wares

You can still buy Lake Michigan fish for your table, if you know where to look. Depending on the season, you can find perch, trout, salmon, smelt, sucker, catfish, whitefish or walleye pikes. The

following retail outlets are either owned by Indiana fishermen or buy their fish from one of the 20 commercial fishermen presently licensed in the state:

Ludwig's, 711 Washington Street, LaPorte, 362-2608, 879-9435 and 233-8595. Open Monday — Friday, 7 a.m. — 4 p.m.; Saturday, 7 a.m. — noon.

Ritter Fish Company, 2nd Street Bridge, Michigan City, 874-7635. Open Monday — Thursday, Saturday, 8:30 a.m. — 5 p.m.; Friday, 8:30 a.m. — 6:30 p.m.

The Anchorage, 6363 Melton Road (Rt. 20), Portage, 762-1972. Open Monday — Thursday, Saturday, 10 a.m. — 6 p.m.; Friday, 10 a.m. — 7 p.m.

Furness Fisheries, 2nd Street Bridge, Michigan City, 874-4761. Open Monday — Thursday and Saturday, 9 a.m. — 5 p.m.; Friday, 9 a.m. — 7 p.m.

Limpid's Landing, Rt. 6, west of Swanson Road, Portage, 763-4888. Open Monday — Thursday and Saturday, 11 a.m. — 7:30 p.m.; Friday, 11 a.m. — 9 p.m.